

Second Corinthians: A Study Guide

Outlined with Sectional Summaries

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Background on Corinth

For hundreds of years, the Romans had engaged in conquering neighboring territories (numerous tribes & Greek colonies in Italy; Carthage, etc.). By the 3rd century B.C., Rome came into conflict with Greece. Corinth was the leader of the opposition to Rome. The conflict came to a head in 146 B.C. when Lucius Mummius, the Roman general, captured Corinth and destroyed the city.

Due to her significant geographical location, however, Julius Caesar rebuilt the city around 44-46 B.C. In 27 B.C., when Augustus became the first Roman emperor, he made Corinth the new capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

In New Testament times, diverse peoples populated the city: philosophers, slaves, sailors, Jews, Roman veterans, Phoenicians, Phrygians, trades-people and others. This mixture of varied peoples with numerous cultural practices combined to make Corinth contaminated with vice and corruption. Before long, the very name *Corinth* became synonymous with excessive indulgences in sensual pleasure, drinking, and other immoral perversions. For example, the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, stood on the hill of the Acropolis, the civic and religious center in the city. Temple prostitutes practiced their trade within the temple and on the streets of Corinth.

Overview of Paul's Corinthian Letters

Perhaps, no other place needed Christianity as much as Corinth. On his second missionary journey, therefore, Paul planted a church in Corinth and remained there for eighteen months. He resided with Aquila and Prisca/Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3) and later with Justus (Acts 18:7).

1 Corinthians 5:9 indicates that Paul had written a now-missing letter in which he appealed to them to shun the evils in the city. On his third missionary journey, while in Ephesus, he became aware of all sorts of troubles and questions by the Corinthian church. For example, there were: (1) arguments over favorite preachers (ch 1:11f); (2) sexual and marital problems (ch 7:1f); (3) eating meat sacrificed to foreign/pagan gods (ch. 8:1f); (4) abuse of spiritual gifts and public worship (ch 11-14), etc. Paul, therefore, wrote 1 Corinthians to address these concerns.

Somehow, however, the situation in Corinth had become worse and Paul made a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1) or second visit to them. [Since 2 Cor. 12:14 and 13:1 refer to his proposed visit to them as being his “third visit,” there had to have been this “second” visit.] This second visit to Corinth turned out to be a failure and Paul also found out about the “super apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11) who were slandering him with false statements about his apostolic credibility. As noted in 2 Corinthians, these attacks consisted of: (1) his fickleness and failure to keep his promises to spend a lengthy time in Corinth (1:15-18); (2) his lack of recommendation letters (3:1f); (3) his preaching is not clear (4:3); (4) his cowardice and only acts boldly from a distance (10:1f); (5) his speeches are bad (10:10; 11:6); (6) his claim to belong to Christ is not true (10:7) (7) his preaching in Corinth is not appropriate (10:13-15); (8) his refusal to accept money from the Corinthians proves that he has no right to do so (11:7-9); (9) his claim to be an apostle is false (12:12); (10) his claim to be a spokesman for Christ has not been proven (13:3).

Paul goes to Troas and preaches with much fruitfulness. His concern over the response of the Corinthians to his letter, however, and his desire for contact with Titus, motivated him to leave for Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:12-13) where Titus eventually arrived. From Macedonia, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in which he countered the charges of his opponents. These “super apostles” (11:5; 12:11) were actually (1) ministers of Satan (11:14-15); (2) preaching another Jesus than the One he preached (11:4); (3) praising themselves (10:12, 18); (4) functioning as parasites who invaded the places others had evangelized and took personal credit for it (10:15-16); (5) using their position as ‘preachers’ to make money off the congregation (2:17) and exploiting them (11:19-20).

The Date of 2 Corinthians

There seems to be no more than 6-9 months between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians (Acts 20:1-3). 2 Corinthians was written while Paul was still in Macedonia, prior to his visit to Corinth. Thus, the date of 2 Corinthians is in the summer or fall of 55-57 A.D.

The Theme of 2 Corinthians

In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s apostolic ministry serves as a baseline for what all Christian ministry should be like. Thus, the theme of 2 Corinthians is *Christian Ministry* and is unfolded from a three-fold perspective:

- I Christian Ministry in General (ch. 1-7)
- II Christian Ministry on Giving (ch. 8-9)
- III Christian Ministry under Grill (ch. 10-13)

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I Christian Ministry in General (1:1-7:16)

A. Preface (1:1-2)

1. Author (1:1)

The Apostle Paul wrote this while on his third missionary journey from Macedonia (probably Philippi) sometime between 55-57 A.D.

2. Associate (1:1)

Timothy is not a co-author but an associate or assistant and a fellow Christian or brother who is frequently associated with Paul in his writings (Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 1; also cp. 1 Corinthians 4:17). According to Acts 19:22, Paul had already sent him on to Macedonia from Ephesus.

3. Audience (1:1)

The intended audience or recipients of the letter are the Christians at Corinth, as well as “all the saints who are throughout Achaia.” This latter phrase may indicate that this was a circular letter and was intended for the church at Cenchrea, the eastern port of Corinth (Rom. 1:16), as well as believers in Athens (Acts 17:15, 16, 22), thus, the entire province of Achaia. However, it may be that Paul was simply identifying the church in Corinth with that Roman province.

4. Affirmation (1:2)

“Grace and peace” are typical terms used by Paul in his affirmative greetings. They include the sum total of all the spiritual blessings from God to man: His love, favor, and spiritual well-being to the undeserving.

B. Praise (1:3-11)

1. Alleviation (1:3-7)

God’s comfort of the afflicted is not designed to make them comfortable. Instead, God comforts the afflicted so that they may be the channels through whom others are comforted.

2. Acquittal (1:8-11)

Although the precise peril is not known, Paul praises God for delivering him from it. This acquittal by God motivated Paul to rely upon God more and more. Those who had been praying for Paul were also praising God for answering their prayers.

C. Perspectives on Delaying Visit to Corinth (1:12-2:4)

Here Paul gives reasons or explanations for change in his travel plans about coming to Corinth.

1. Approval of Conscience (1:12-14)

With his own conscience bearing witness to the honesty and sincerity by which he conducts himself, Paul assures them the change in travel plans was consistent with the grace of God. His conscience was also clear because there were no hidden meanings in his words, no ulterior motives in his actions, and despite lack of complete understanding, all would eventually be clear.

2. Assurance of Consistency (1:15-22)

Paul dashes any doubts about fickleness or inconsistency with regard to his travel plans. He calls upon God to verify his character, even to the point of appealing to the character of Jesus Christ Himself, with Whom his own truthfulness is consistently affirmed. After all, all that he is doing is in accord with his commission from God, as identified by the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

3. Avoidance of Confrontation (1:23-2:4)

Paul now adds that his delay or change in travel plans was also to avoid a severe rebuke in another painful visit. His previous painful letter actually broke his heart. His intention was to motivate them to straighten things out before he came to see them. His motive was one of love (cp. Rev. 3:19).

D. Principles of Christian Ministry (2:5-7:16)

1. Forgiveness (2:5-11)

Whatever the wrong, and whoever perpetrated all the trouble, are not identified. Whether it was the sexual immorality mentioned in 1 Cor. 5 or the man who led in the opposition to Paul, the point is, nevertheless, the same: *forgiveness is not optional*. Having been disciplined for the purpose of correction, comfort and encouragement should now be attended by forgiveness. In fact, the refusal to forgive only opens wide the door for Satan to destroy the man and create additional havoc in the church.

2. Triumph (2:12-17)

As Paul reflected on his tremendous opportunities to preach in Troas, he was, nevertheless, restless because Titus, his dear brother in the Lord, had not arrived with a report as to the nature of things in Corinth (cp. 7:5-16 for the joyful arrival of Titus). Such restlessness, however, was offset, somewhat, as Paul launched into superlative comments on the triumphant nature of God and the gospel, despite what life hurls our way, including the hucksters who were harassing Paul. After all, God not only sends us but also watches over us.

3. Changed Lives (3:1-6)

Instead of letters of recommendation (requested or otherwise) to qualify the genuineness of someone or some purpose, Paul exclaims that the Corinthian believers themselves, as tokens of his work, constitute his letter of recommendation. The contrast he makes between “pen and ink” and “spirit” serve to represent the old and new covenant. No longer under the domination of the old covenant and death, he is now under the liberation of the new covenant and life by the Holy Spirit. It is only the Spirit of God Who creates changed lives – his and others for Christian ministry.

4. Spiritually Glorious (3:7-18)

In fact, the old covenant is now presented as one of fading glory and the new covenant as one of overwhelming glory. The former was temporary and brought only condemnation, while the latter is permanent and makes us right with God. By contemplatively “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord,” the Spirit of the Lord works transformatively and assimilatively, as we are “being changed into His likeness, from one degree of glory to another.”

5. Truthfulness (4:1-6)

Christian ministry is based on the truthfulness of the Word of God and should not be adapted to fit the preferences of anyone, including those who preach that Word. Any distortions of that Word, and all blindness to that Word, are anchored in Satan who is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

6. Powerful (4:7-15)

The treasure of God (“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”) is precious and powerful, not because of the perishable nature of the containers in which it is stored (our weak and fragile bodies), but because of the treasure within those containers. In

fact, the weakness of the containers and the transcendent power of God's treasure are contrasted: (1) afflicted – not crushed; (2) perplexed – not despairing; (3) persecuted – not forsaken; (4) struck down – not destroyed. Although the constant danger of death is ever before us, as we engage in Christian ministry, serving Him is more important, despite the consequences. No present problems, which are only temporary, outweigh the joys to come and which will last forever.

7. Hopeful/Steadfastness (4:16-18)

Verse 16 resumes the thought of verse 1. Despite perishing bodies, our spirits are characterized by a hopefulness or steadfastness which does not give up or give in to difficulties. The afflictions of this life are real but comparatively small in light of the future, eternal glory. Our attention, therefore, is concentrated in the eternal realm of things not seen, not to what is visible.

8. Ambition (5:1-10)

Our present, physical bodies consist of weariness, groaning, and sighing due to pain. They are only temporary and will eventually die. Eventually, they will be swallowed up by everlasting life in permanent heavenly bodies, devoid of frailties and limitations. Our aim and ambition throughout life, therefore, is to please Him in all things, small and great. After all, the future judgment seat of Christ will reveal how well that aim and ambition was carried out. If we don't please Him here and now, we cannot realistically expect to please Him there and then.

9. Motives (5:11-17)

In order for Christian ministry to be conducted in a way that honors and makes God's presence evident, there are certain motives which must dominate the landscape: (1) the reverential fear (awe and wonder) of God's love and greatness; (2) sincerity or genuineness of heart before God and man; (3) the glory of God (that is, making His presence known) and the good of others; (4) the love of Christ must control whatever we do; (5) selflessness must characterize us in the same way that sacrificial giving characterized Christ in His death on our behalf; and (6) worldly standards or values, such as race, social status, and wealth are to be avoided as ways to measure or evaluate others. In other words, the new life must manifest itself in new manners, methods, and motives of conduct.

10. Reconciliation (5:18-21)

The assignment from God is unmistakable: those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ have not only become new

creations themselves but also have become recipients of the ministry of reconciliation. That is, the task of sharing the good news of Christ to the unreconciled is clearly committed to the reconciled. As His ambassadors, the reconciled ones are called upon to share the good news that the Sinless One was made sin so that the sinful ones might be made saints. Just as Christ identified Himself with us in our sinfulness, so the reconciled ones are identified with Him in His righteousness. As sin was placed on Him and He was reckoned with as though it was His own sin, so His righteousness is reckoned to us as though it was our very own. Thus, the message of Christian ministry is clear for His ambassadors: *Be reconciled to God*. This is the unmistakable, un-debatable, irrevocable, irreversible, absolute message for all who are engaged in Christian ministry.

11. Determination (6:1-10)

Even though the purpose of God and the pleas of His ambassadors may be resisted, it is the Christian's determination to press on with lifestyles which do not negate the positive message or hinder the effectiveness of Christian ministry. In spite of the external problems (troubles, hardships, calamities, being beaten, angry mobs, exhaustion, sleepless nights, and hunger), the manifestation of internal Spirit-generated character traits (purity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, and power) will prove our authenticity as His ambassadors. God's power accompanies the faithful preaching of His Word and His righteousness defends His ambassadors and attacks His opponents. Determination is essential in Christian ministry despite the conflicting and hazardous reactions from others.

12. Separation (6:11-7:1)

Sandwiched between and on the basis of Paul's transparent honesty and the ambassadors reverential fear or awe and wonder of God, it is imperative that God's ambassadors: (1) be open to God's truths about avoiding associations with those who are opposed to God (unbelievers, partners in wickedness, darkness, the Devil, idols) because your bodies are temples of the living God; (2) actively distance yourselves from and be separate from such unhealthy people; and (3) don't harm or injure yourselves by contamination with any immoral impurities which fog one's fellowship with God. Therefore, we are exhorted to clean ourselves from all defilements through ongoing efforts since the outcome will justify the efforts.

13. Joy (7:2-16)

Even though Paul reminds the Corinthians that confrontation and rebuke

are sometimes necessary to bring about needed changes, despite the temporary pain and sorrow, the results are worth it all. Therefore, he here acknowledges that making things right has created an atmosphere of joyfulness, happiness, encouragement, gladness, appropriate pride, confidence, and delight. After all, the joy of seeing others reconciled, welcomed back into the fold, and involved again in Christian ministry is the kind of joy that reveals the glorious presence of God Himself.

II Christian Ministry on Giving (8:1-9:15)

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul had mentioned his concern for the Corinthians to participate in the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Because of the friction which had arisen between them and him, however, they had apparently paused in pursuing the matter. Now that the friction has abated, he exhorts them to complete their part in this ministry of giving.

A. Examples (8:1-9)

1. Macedonians (8:1-8)

“The churches of Macedonia” include Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. “Although they had been going through much trouble and hard times, their wonderful joy and deep poverty have overflowed in rich generosity” (v. 2). Apparently, therefore, Paul had not urged them to participate in the collection. So, “they begged us again and again for the gracious privilege of sharing in the gift for the Christians in Jerusalem” (v. 4). Unlike the Corinthians who did not face such affliction and poverty, the example of the Macedonians should powerfully motivate them to fall in line behind the Macedonians. In fact, Paul said that in light of their excellence in “faith, gifted speakers, knowledge, enthusiasm, and love” (v. 7), they should excel in giving as well. To do so would be indisputable proof of the reality of their love.

2. Messiah (8:9)

The ultimate example of giving, of course, was the Messiah Himself. Although prior to His incarnation, Jesus was rich with all the splendors of heaven, He abandoned those splendors by sacrificially becoming man for the sake of sinful man. He left the permanent glories of heaven for the temporary gloom of earth and paid the penalty for sinful man so that all who commit themselves to Him would be permanently wealthy with all the riches of heaven.

B. Enthusiasm (8:10-11)

So, on the basis of these marvelous examples, it is good for the Corinthians to

be as enthusiastic in their completion of the collection as they had been in both proposing the idea in the first place and being the first to begin doing something about it. In fact, he commands them to complete the collection out of what they have.

C. Economy (8:12-15)

God, of course, does not expect people to give what they do not have. In fact, in stressing the principle of equality, Paul does not expect people to give in such a way that they themselves wind up with too little. However, the time may come when their positions are reversed and the Corinthians end up on the receiving end. So, God's economics involves equality. In order to illustrate this truth, Paul refers to God's dealings with the Israelites in the desert (Ex. 16:18).

D. Enlistment (8:16-24)

So, in order to rupture any suspicions of the potential misuse of the collection, Paul enlists the support and supervision of Titus and two unnamed brothers. All three were authorized or appointed by the churches. Thus, honesty was to be inwardly practiced, and accountability would be outwardly verified.

E. Eagerness (9:1-5)

Just as Paul had used the example of the Macedonians to motivate the Corinthians (8:1-8), so the example of the Corinthians is used as an incentive for the Macedonians. In order that Paul's boasting of them would not be in vain, he urges them to relight the match of their eagerness. So, by arranging in advance the procurement of their promise, eagerness, rather than extortion, would be seen as the basis of their willing gift.

F. Exhilaration (9:6-7)

By using an agricultural analogy, Paul observes that what a farmer reaps depends on what he sows – little or much. So, for those in Corinth, their level of giving will determine their level of exhilaration or cheerfulness. The Greek word translated “cheerful, very merry” is transliterated *hilaron*, from which we get the English word, “hilarious.” So, God loves people who give *hilariously*; that is, with a very merry, cheerful spirit – not one of reluctance or under pressure. After all, this is the way God gives.

G. Effects (9:8-15).

The effects or results of giving with a proper spirit are that God will generously provide for all your needs. This is in keeping with God's Word in Psalm 112:9. God is the One Who will give many opportunities to do additional good as a manifestation of His righteous generosity. So, being liberal or generous in giving

is a ministry which all may do – regardless of the amount. The effects or results are not only the approval of God but also thanksgiving and glory to God, as well as revealing one's obedience to God. Such obedience will lead to deep and affectionate prayers in their behalf for God's grace. He, after all, gave His Son. Such a gift exceeds the ability of human language to adequately express the deserved thanksgiving in that regard.

III Christian Ministry under Grill (10:1-13:14)

In this third section of the letter, Paul directs his attention to the stubborn minority in Corinth who had instigated, and to some extent, still were offering resistance and opposition to him. Therefore, the tone and style of the letter drastically changes here. It tends to resemble more of a polemic (a defense; a disputing discussion; a controversy or argument).

A. Authentication (10:1-18)

1. Stern Action (10:1-11)

Paul begins his appeal of authentication with the same spirit of meekness and gentleness which characterized Christ Himself. He does not act from purely human motives, plans, and methods in knocking down the Devil's strongholds and proud arguments that keep people from knowing God. In other words, he is not like a proud, worldly man who acts on his own resources. In fact, he is prepared to take stern action, if necessary, when he arrives in Corinth. His boast about the authority he has from the Lord is for the purpose of building them up, not tearing them down, and to prevent his own work among them from being torn down. So, he assures them that there will be no disparity between what he says in his letters and what he actually does in their presence.

2. Special Authority (10:12-18)

With sarcasm, he notes that his opponents were measuring and comparing themselves by no higher and foolish standard than *themselves*. Their sense of importance was based on subjective, selfish vanity. Paul's objective standard was none other than God and His plan for his life. It is the Lord's special authority invested in Christian ministry and ministers which authenticates the genuineness of God's commendation.

B. Anxiety (11:1-15)

Even though Paul has just stated that it is not self-commendation but God-commendation that really counts in Christian ministry, his anxious concern for the welfare of the Corinthians focuses on two main items of importance:

1. Super Apostles (11:1-6, 13-15)

The *foolishness* in which he now engages is only done so apologetically or containing a defense. Actually, it is based on the jealousy of God Himself and the zeal for undivided love and loyalty which characterizes that jealousy. Perceiving that their lack of spiritual depth and tendency to believe what the super apostles teach or preach could lead them to a different kind of gospel was mind boggling to Paul. Like Eve, the ease with which they could be deceived was very much alive. In fact, what is stated here implicitly is stated explicitly in vs. 13-15: these super apostles are actually ministers of Satan who have disguised themselves as ministers of righteousness. Despite the disguise, however, their behaviors demonstrate that they are workers of iniquity. Therefore, these ministers of Satan, and those who hear and heed them, will have an end which corresponds with their degraded and degrading deeds.

2. Self-support Accusations (11:7-12)

Paul was also anxious about the accusations over his refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthians. According to Acts 18:3, Paul had supported himself by tent-making. However, Acts 18:5 indicates that Paul had apparently received financial support from the Macedonians who had delivered it to Paul through Silas and Timothy. For the time being, this had given Paul some relief from tent-making so that he could devote himself full time to preaching. In reality, Paul's refusal to accept such support from the Corinthians was proof of his love – not lack of it. He did not want to be a burden to them and wanted to remain as financially independent as possible, so as to cut the ground of accusations out from under their feet. In other words, he did not want them to have a leg to stand on.

C. Accounts (11:16-12:18)

Paul now proceeds to give three varied accounts of how his particular experiences in Christian ministry unfolded:

1. Suffering Adversity (11:16-33)

Paul reluctantly continues with his foolishness in order to make his point. The words “too” or “also” indicate that his opponents had engaged in foolishness and the Corinthians had listened to them. So, he dares to travel down the same pathway. His opponents had boasted of their success. Paul, however, boasts of his sufferings and adversity for Christ's sake. The itemized troubles he endured should shame any and all who are tempted to complain about their lot in life. He boasts in his weaknesses, however, because only God could have brought him through those sufferings.

2. Supernatural Activities (12:1-10)

The super apostles in Corinth had apparently spoken about their supernatural experiences and visions, so, Paul also mentions, with reluctance, his own supernatural experiences. Like John in Rev. 10:4, however, he was also prohibited from giving the details of his own experiences. After all, he was called to preach Christ – not visions or experiences. So, with his boasting at an end, and without elaboration, Paul states that he was given an unidentified “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble and on task. Whatever it was, God’s grace was sufficient to empower or strengthen even the weakest in Christian ministry.

3. Selfless Agape (12:11-18)

In contrast to the self-seeking of the super apostles, Paul acknowledges his nothingness. Nevertheless, God worked mightily through him with signs and wonders and miracles among them. His refusal to accept pay from them was a “wrong” in their eyes only. His intent, like that of parents for their children, was to help and have the welfare of their very spiritual being in his heart. Although accused by some of sneakiness and trickery, Paul insists that neither he nor any he sent to them took advantage of them in any way. Selfless agape in the form of good-will and benevolent concerns in their behalf was the driving force of his life and his associates.

D. Assertions (12:19-13:14)

As Paul nears the end of his letter, he calls attention to the following assertions or statements:

1. Severe Apprehension (12:19-21)

Lest the Corinthians think that he has been defending himself before *them*, he makes it clear and plain that he is speaking before *God* and that *Christ* is the One Who has motivated him to speak as he has. Everything that Paul and his associates have said and done is for their benefit. Nevertheless, he is apprehensive about what he may encounter when he arrives and how they will react to his response. The catalogue of potential evils he mentions will only serve as shocking behaviors by which the super apostles and critics will argue against him and his directed reliance upon the Spirit of God to make changes in people’s lives. Their refusal to have repented will bring disgrace to God’s grace.

2. Sensible Admonitions (13:1-10)

In view of his upcoming third visit to Corinth, Paul admonishes them to

realize that he, like Christ, is weak in submitting to suffering, but strong as far as living by the power of God is concerned when it comes to exercising authority and dealing with them and their problems. So, instead of examining the genuineness of Paul, they should examine themselves. Paul wants them to do what is “right” (v. 7) and prays for their “improvement” or “restoration to maturity” (v. 9). His admonitions are sensible and based on the fact that the authority the Lord has given him is “to build you up, not to tear you down” (v. 10).

3. Spiritual Adieu (13:11-14)

Even though Paul had written somewhat severely, he now closes with his spiritual adieu of six imperatives which demand obedience: rejoice; mend your ways; encourage each other; live in harmony; be at peace; greet each other with a holy kiss (*a sign of accepted forgiveness, reconciliation, fidelity, and gratitude*) [Stahlin]. The closing comments about grace, love, and fellowship were appropriate enough for contemplative encouragement.

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